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Preservation and Recycling of Heritage Buildings in Malacca

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Abstract

This paper elaborates on the preservation and recycling of the buildings along Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street, one of the important heritage streets in Malacca, Malaysia. The street was part of the historic city that was inscribed as World Heritage Site in 2008. Scholars stress that the practice of using the old buildings can save them from being replaced by new buildings. This practice also helps to preserve the identity of a place. The research involved site observation, literature review and interview. The findings indicate that there were both positive and negative interventions on the heritage buildings along the street.

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1. Introduction

This paper elaborates on the preservation and re-cycling of the buildings along Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street, one of the important heritage streets in Malacca, Malaysia. The street was part of the Historic City of Malacca that was inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. The recognition was partly due to the existence of a diversity of tangible and intangible heritage within the area. The tangible heritage includes the heritage buildings such as public buildings, religious buildings, town houses and shop houses. The retention of the heritage buildings is particularly important within the core zone that is the most important area that needs to be addressed for conservation. The main intention is to ensure the continuous inscription in the world listing. It was found in the earlier research (Wan Hashimah, 2012b) that the buildings within the Malacca have the ability to adapt to new uses. However, the research was

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done on the whole of the core zone. The core zones consist of several streets and lined by hundreds of buildings. Some details concerning each street could have been missed due to time constraint.

The current research intended to look into the details of the sustainability of each building along one street only, namely Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street. Sustainability in this paper relates to the prolong use of the old structures over the years. The focus was on the current use and the changes on the physical aspects that could have taken place on each building along both sides of the street. The actual function of the buildings may relate to the current demands of the society and may differ to what they were intended to be. The main intention was to check whether the current use and the physical aspects of the buildings comply with the rules and regulations imposed by the local authority and the guidelines by UNESCO. This is to ensure the continuous inscription of the street and the whole of the core zone of Malacca in the world listing.

2. Literature review

One of the ways of keeping the heritage buildings is by recycling them to contemporary uses. This was stressed by scholars indicating that the practice of using the old buildings could save them from being replaced by new buildings. Cantacuzino (1989) considers it to be a natural phenomenon since the building structure tends to outlive its intended function. Feilden (1982) for instance, did not just cover the physical aspects of the buildings but more on social issues. He suggested that rehabilitation of buildings is also a means of keeping the identity of the people and town.

Both George Town and Malacca received World Heritage Site status in 2008. The interest in the pre-war houses in both places has spiked. It is a common practice that a new acquired purchased building will be repaired or renovated by the new perspective owners. Lim Ai Lee (2012) reports that between 2008 and May 2012, 882 transactions were recorded in the George Town World Heritage Site, which has 3,643 heritage buildings. In other words, more than 800 old buildings in George Town have exchanged hand within 4 years (2008 to 2012). The Penang Municipal Council has approved applications to restore 428 such buildings within 4 years since 2008. This also means that the rest of the buildings (about 370 out of 800 units) were either not restored or had undergone renovations without the approval of Penang Municipal Council. This also suggests that recycling heritage buildings could also form a threat. It could be caused by illegal and unsympathetic renovations as highlighted by Khoo Salma (in Lim Ai Lee, 2012). She posits that a lot of illegal renovations were taking place in George Town resulting in some buildings stand out like sore thumbs.

Recycling of heritage buildings can also change their character. As highlighted by Fernando (2001) 8% of the early shop houses in Malacca are still in the original form while 51% had been renovated and 41% had either perished or lost in originality due to renovation works. The original form in this case means the form of the buildings that were built during the Dutch occupation of Malacca. These buildings are characterized by low buildings, with simple, utilitarian forms and basically painted white.

There are many other factors that can affect the sustainability of the buildings in the Historic City of Malacca core zone of the world listing. Some factors were covered in the earlier researches on the area that include Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street by Wan Hashimah, (2012a; 2012b). The emphasis was to look at the perceptions of the visitors and the local residents and on using the buildings. The other factor was relating to the enforcement of the conservation policies by the local authorities that suggested negative findings whereby there was a lack of awareness among the local residents (Wan Hashimah, 2012b). It was found that 122 out of 200 (61.0%) of the local residents in the Historic City of Malacca were not aware of the policies. The finding relates to a similar research by Zalina (2009) that suggests a low heritage awareness and interest among the council members and the shop owners in Taiping, another town that has a lot of heritage building within the urban area. The reasons for not supporting the heritage

vision among the shop owners and shop house tenants were lack of heritage knowledge and low financial returns. Among the council members, the reasons for not supporting the heritage vision include lack of heritage knowledge, low development progress and protecting the shop owners as well as personal interests. The other negative finding was that the majority of the residents considered the shop houses in the core zone of the Historic City of Malacca were suitable for working but not for staying (Wan Hashimah, 2012b). The findings on the visitors suggested that the shop houses in the core zone were not perceived as comfortable places for shopping activities by one third of them (Wan Hashimah, 2010). The core zone of the Historic City of Malacca consisted mainly of houses and shops. The area also relies largely on the visitors for economic return and to keep it alive.

2.1. Study area

The study area was Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street, one of the prestigious streets in the Historic City of Malacca. The buildings along the street were one of the earliest built structures built by the Dutch as accommodation quarters. The buildings that remain are basically the early structures built during the Dutch occupation of Malacca (1641-1795) and known as '*Heeren Straat*' translated as 'first class gentlemen street' and were built for the Dutch officers. In the past, the back portion of the houses faced the Straits of Melaka and had a good view of the sea front. Currently, the reclamation project has denied this luxury from this row of houses. Many of the houses were bought by the Chinese after the Dutch left Malacca. Many of the simple forms of the Dutch houses were transformed to the desires of the Chinese new owners. It should be noted that all the buildings were labelled as shop houses during the British occupation of Malacca as indicated in the map of Malacca town in 1916. According to the report by the city council (MBMB, 2003) there were 1839 buildings within the core zone of the historic city of Malacca, out of which 213 (11.6%) units were along Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street.

2.2. Policies

Several conservation policies were introduced even before the inscription of the area in World Heritage Site. Two of the main acts that were adhered to by the local authority in Malacca were Melaka Enactment and Antiquities Act 1976 (Act 168). The policies also cover the change in the uses of the buildings. The encouraged uses of buildings along Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street as recommended by the Historic Malacca City Council (MBMB, 2003) were accommodation especially on the upper floor, art gallery and antique shop. It was also mentioned in the report that in order to retain the heritage buildings, the uses that are forbidden are those that can damage the building structure, have loud noises, smelly and dirty. The types of buildings that have those characteristics include shopping complex, wholesale, workshop and factories. Both shopping complex and wholesale would induce lots of traffic. Workshop and factories on the other hand can pollute the area and put the existing buildings under risk.

One of the methods to ensure the retention of the buildings is through the enforcement by the local authority. A proposal for the renovation work of any building needs to be submitted to the local council. The renovation work can proceed only after a written approval is obtained from the local authority. The procedure is important to ensure all new development or rehabilitation of existing buildings is according to the technical, law, structural plan and government policies. Penalties could be imposed on the owners who do any renovation work without the approval from the local authority.

The development that need the approval of the local authority include demolishing, building a new building, rehabilitation of an old structure or renovation as follows:

- Any extension in terms of height or width of building
- To build a roof or rebuilding a roof for the building or part of it

- Any extension or changes to a building that affect drainage in terms of its arrangement, cleanliness or stability
- Any extension or changes to a building before or after the building is completed, or differ from the original approval
- Any extension or changes to a building
- Any other work that is done by a person or another that involve construction

3. Methodology

The studies on Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street in the historic town of Malacca involved site observation, literature review, short interviews and study of documents. An overall observation of the Malacca core zone was conducted twice a year within four years between 2008 and 2012. A detailed study of each building along Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street was conducted in 2012 focusing on the physical aspects and the function of each building. This was checked against the earlier survey conducted by the Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in 2002 (Historic Melaka City Council, 2003) the findings of earlier researches (Wan Hashimah, 2012a; 2012b), literature review, short interviews and study of documents. The modifications on the buildings were again checked with the rules and regulations imposed by the local authority and the guidelines by UNESCO. Only then the conclusion is deduced.

4. Findings

It was found that the physical aspects and the current function of several buildings along the street keep evolving. There were always buildings under renovation. The buildings that were in full use at a certain time were found to be otherwise later. For instance, the building at number 36 was used as Ginger Flower Boutique Hotel. Then, in December 2012 the hotel had moved to a new renovated building at number 13 along the same street. On the whole, the boundaries of each building still follow the narrow elongated plots as in the earlier period. The changes that took place were either on the facade, interior or the back. The majority of the houses had increased in floor to floor height. This was obviously visible when compared with the low height of the early Dutch houses. One way or the other, the street still retained its character as an area for accommodation whereby the street was narrow and included a narrow private *verandah* (Fig. 1a).



Fig. 1. (a) Buildings along the study area; (b) A house along the street

Based on the latest survey in December 2012 there were 41 houses that were still in use (Table 1). This was roughly about one fifth (23.16%) of the total number of buildings along the street. The buildings that still retain their intended uses as accommodation quarters or houses include those at numbers 73, 83, 85 and 99 (Figure 1b). The house at number 73 for instance was in a good condition and was owned by Tan Chay Yan, the first rubber planter in Malacca. This shows that some local residents still found it to be desirable to live in the houses along the street. One of the possible reasons could be because there were not many shops along the street as compared to the next parallel street, that is Hang Jebat Street or popularly known as Jonker Street. Altogether, there were only 26 (14.69%) shops along Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street.

Quite a large number (27, 15.25%) of the houses are not being used and some looked abandoned. An example of a house in a very poor condition is at number 22 (Figure 2a). It has the early form of the Dutch period that could be easily noticed by the low height and simple form. According to the research done by Raja Nafida (2008) there were only 291 early Dutch houses found in the core zone. Out of that 112 of them still retain the form and the interior of the early forms. There were 82 units of these early Dutch houses along the street. These buildings are important examples of the Dutch period and also as examples of the different layers of the colonial powers in the history of Malacca. Thus, these buildings should be maintained.

The findings above also suggest that altogether there were only 68 houses (38.41%) out of 177 buildings that still retained the original intended use of the buildings. The other 88 buildings (50.28%) were basically the rehabilitation of the earlier houses. This means that almost half of the buildings along the street were being used for other purposes. The other 9 units (5.08%) were used as parking spaces while the rest (11 units, 6.21%) were under renovation.

Table 1. The different uses of the buildings

NO	BUILDING USE	TOTAL	%
1	Houses in use	41	23.16
2	Houses not in use/poor condition	27	15.25
3	Shops in use	26	14.69
4	Shops not in use	8	4.52
5	Cafeteria	11	6.21
6	Hotel/Guest house	11	6.21
7	Office	6	3.39
8	Association	7	3.95
9	Institution	2	1.13
10	Gallery/studio	9	5.08
11	Parking	9	5.08
12	Under renovation	11	6.21
13	Museum	9	5.08
TOTAL		177	100

Source: Author (2012)

The appropriate uses of the old buildings were in line with the suggestions made by the local council (Historic Melaka City Council, 2003) that include remaining as accommodation quarters or converted to hotel, cafeteria, shop house, gallery, museum, etc. National University of Singapore came with a different

commendable approach. Two houses at numbers 54 and 56 were donated by Ms Agnes Tan, the daughter of Tun Tan Cheng Lock and conserved as an area study of historical architecture and urban environments of Asia. It was intended as a resource centre for the architectural students for hosting symposiums, seminars, workshops and expert sessions on conservation. The interior clearly show the conservation approach by exposing the original fabrics of the houses. The facades were also left in their original state. Number 56 in particular showed the character of its earlier use with the writings read as 'Yeoh Maternity Home'. The other commendable example is the rehabilitation of houses into hotels, such as Courtyard @ Heeren Hotel at number 91. The sensitive design of the hotel won Malaysian Architects Association (PAM) award in 2010. The design was done by injecting new materials and ideas within the interior while at the same time retaining the basic form of the original houses.

There were two big houses that were recessed from the street. The first was Tun Tan Cheng Lock House at numbers 117 to 119 and the other at numbers 133 to 135. Tun Tan Cheng Lock House (Nos. 117-119) with its elegant character looks well maintained. The second house (Nos. 133-135) was also beautifully built and architecturally pleasing but clearly neglected (Figure 2b). It is a pity if it remains to be in the present condition and leave to rot.



Fig. 2. (a) An abandoned early Dutch house; (b) A beautiful but neglected building

The inappropriate use of the buildings in the heritage zone includes their use as parking spaces. Nine (5.08%) of the buildings along the street were used as parking spaces (Table 1). Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street was always busy with passing traffic and the parking of cars along the street. The parking of cars inside the buildings worsened the situation. Another inappropriate use of the buildings that could not be easily seen by walking through the street was the breeding of birds known as swiftlets in the heritage buildings. The interest in swiftlet breeding was due to the high demand on the nests that could fetch very good prices as high as RM5,000 per kilogram. It was noted by Lim and Jorge (2006) that over 14 houses along the street have already been converted for this purpose. In order to create a favourable environment for the habitat of these birds, the air wells, windows and doors have been sealed. The interiors are also darkened and kept permanently damp. This practice is very destructive to the heritage buildings because the dampness could destroy the timber constructional parts of the interior. The houses that were used for breeding swiftlets were at number 75, 77 and 79. In fact, these three houses were converted into a museum on swiftlet farming and the parts of the houses were used for this purpose. The houses suspected of being used for the same purpose were at numbers 72, 74, 133 and 135. A loud chirping noise could be heard from those houses.

The other aspect is the use of different form of openings. Being accommodation quarters, the windows of the houses were relatively small. Some buildings had changed in terms of the function but still managed to remain coherent with the rest of the buildings along the street. An example of this was that of a cafeteria at number 100. Across the street was number 101, a disturbing example of a shop with a large glass opening. If this practice spread throughout the street, the character of accommodation quarters will be lost.

There were 11 buildings under renovation (Table 1). However, not all the buildings under renovation had notice boards informing the approval by the local authority. As mentioned earlier an approval from the local authority need to be obtained before any renovation work could proceed. The finding suggests that there was a possibility that some of the buildings could have undergone renovation without the approval of the local authority.

One neglected aspect in the conservation of the street was the emphasis on the rear of the buildings. On the whole, the rear of the buildings was rather neglected. As an example the rear of the building at number 69 that functioned as a gallery at the front was full of undergrowth at the back. Historically the rear of the buildings was actually the facades that faced the sea. In the past part of the back portion was on stilts with the sea water underneath. This was where goods were delivered by boats as elaborated by Lim Teng Ngim (2005). This aspect was only retrieved by the Jonker Birds House at number 77, whereby the floor stood on stilts in a fish pond.

The other aspect is the control in terms of the choice of colour on the front facades of the buildings. The striking blue colour of the building at number 84 looked out of place and disturbed the serenity of the street. The other buildings were basically painted with soft pastel colours that depict the original shades and seem sympathetic to the character of the whole heritage street.

5. Conclusion

On the whole, the findings indicate that there were both positive and negative interventions on the heritage buildings along the street. The findings suggest that the old buildings built in the 18th century along Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street could be rehabilitated to new contemporary uses. The reuse of an old building enables generation after generation to appreciate the identity of building and the street. It is desirable that the buildings can still be in use in the future. Even though the buildings survived until today, there were a few aspects that seem to be damaging to the intention of preserving the whole street as a heritage zone. This includes the overall maintenance of the buildings along the street as well as the surrounding areas within the core zone.

Since the majority of the buildings are privately owned, it is necessary to make the residents aware of the proper ways to preserve and re-cycle while maintaining the heritage value of the buildings. The controllers also need to have a deeper understanding and awareness on the heritage buildings to ensure the buildings along the street retain their respective heritage values. This includes a better control on the sizes of the openings on the façade, the colour of the facades, the use of the buildings and also to supervise the adjacent areas. Some strategies need to be made to ensure the local residents remain living in the houses along the street. The intention is to prevent the reduction of people living along the street. One possible solution could be in limiting the number of shops along the street because the street was already busy and would get worse with the increment. On the whole, a proper recycling of heritage buildings can help to sustain the heritage buildings within the street.

The research on the physical aspects and the function of each building was done only on one particular street. This could be extended to the other streets of the core zone of the Historic City of Malacca. This will enable the good qualities to be revealed that can be used on the other streets and the bad qualities

could be rectified for the betterment of the streets. This will ensure the continuous inscription of the street and the whole core zone in the world listing.

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